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*THE ESCHATOLOGY OF THE SYNOPTIC GOSPELS:
ITS FIDELITY TO RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE*

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After the critical proving as by fire to which the Bible has been subjected during recent years, Protestant apologists have succeeded in re-establishing its claim to a position of central importance in our religion. They have achieved this end by abandoning Calvin's vicious logical circle, which based the authority of Scripture upon the approving testimony of the Spirit and tested the Spirit by the standards of Scripture, and by adopting the more powerful lines of argument deduced from the accepted canons of general literary criticism. "I know that the Bible is true because it finds me," said Coleridge, and thus he achieved in a single sentence what the labored casuistry of centuries had failed to establish. The Bible is true, we say in this generation, because it presents persistent types of profound religious experience which may be verified, "always, everywhere, by all men."

In particular the critic asserts, and for Christianity at large this is the most reassuring dictum of contemporary scholarship, that the teaching of Jesus, as recorded in the Synoptic Gospels, constitutes a body of truth quite untrammelled by the narrowing circumstances of time and place. In the Sermon on the Mount we stand in a "celestial everywhere and forever." Occasional dissenting voices have not destroyed the wide-spread conviction that modern scholarship in thus vindicating the universal validity of Jesus' words has achieved, if not its perfect work, at least a signal contribution to contemporary faith.

To the permanent validity of Jesus' teaching the present day has been compelled, however, to take one large exception. The eschatology of the Synoptic Gospels apparently controverts all reasonable standards of universality, and confines one to the "preposterous then and there." This age frankly acknowledges its inability to ascribe present spiritual significance to the

apocalyptic programme of religious progress, whether presented by uncanonical or by canonical writings. The problems raised by those portions of Jesus' teaching cast in this mould are confessedly serious. "We must all of us agree," says a recent essay,¹ "that unless some consensus of opinion among Biblical critics justifies us in denying the authenticity of certain of the sayings of Jesus . . . we shall find this attack upon our citadel the most dangerous in history. For even now things sidereal continue as they were since the beginning of creation."

Every student of the New Testament has felt the inadequacy of the familiar solutions of this problem. An earlier objective-minded orthodoxy found a justification for and a fulfilment of Jesus' words about the catastrophic consummation of the age in the happenings of Pentecost. This hypothesis does credit to our predecessors' ingenuity rather than to their candor. Later subjective-minded believers have spiritualized the whole subject, and thus avoided its obvious dilemmas. But in such exegesis the Ritschlians merely strike hands with the Alexandrians in their familiar preference for faith-values, and Luther is right when he says, "Allegories serve well for such preachers as have not studied much, who know not rightly how to expound the histories and texts, whose leather is too short and will not stretch; we should accustom ourselves to remain by the clear and pure text." Most persons, unsatisfied with both these arbitrary solutions, preserve their faith in the spiritual immediacy of Jesus' words by denying the authenticity of the apocalyptic matter accredited to him, and dismissing it as a later Jewish accretion upon the substratum of the original gospel. But this expedient is open to serious critical objections. For, whatever may be the relation of these passages to the current messianic categories, they form part of the groundwork of the oldest tradition, and from a literary standpoint must stand or fall with that record as a whole. Of the thirty "doubly attested sayings," cited by Burkitt, at least seven are distinctly apocalyptic in form and substance. The urgency of practical religion may warrant the believer in culling out an eclectic gospel for his private needs, but from the point of view of Synoptic procedure we have no more warrant for rejecting the twenty-fourth

¹ Ambrose W. Vernon in the *Hibbert Journal* for October, 1910.

chapter of Matthew, for example, than for rejecting the Sermon on the Mount.

Common recognition of the place of the eschatological matter in the primitive gospel has led to a re-examination of the whole field. Criticism now enables us to trace a slight development and expansion of the original idea during the period in which the gospels were taking form. Professor von Dobschütz has also recently argued that part of Jesus' teaching about the last things, when compared with contemporary apocalyptic literature, constitutes a "transmuted eschatology," that is, a dematerialized eschatology. Yet when these concessions have been made, there are still large blocks of discourse, neither accretions, nor yet a transmuted conception of the messianic consummation, which must be attributed to Jesus himself. It has, therefore, become necessary to review, as best we may, the development of Jesus' messianic self-consciousness. Few disciples of the present day are inclined to deny the validity of Jesus' belief in the perpetuity of his own person and the growth of the Kingdom. We are also coming to see that when Jesus sought to formulate and express these ideas he had only the messianic categories of his own day. We may regret that Jesus was compelled to have recourse to modes of thought which from the vantage-ground of later centuries seem scientifically inaccurate and baldly unspiritual; but what are the conceivable alternatives? Had he striven to express himself in any other terms, the dilemma would be infinitely more serious. That he prophesied his immediate return upon the clouds of glory may be a very real stumbling-block to his disciples of the twentieth century; but had he been a great anachronism and foretold his part in the realization of the increasing purpose, in terms of the "ascent of man," he would be a hopeless riddle. The present-day believer may very properly prefer some sober terminology to the catastrophic language of the Book of Enoch when he seeks to describe spiritual progress, but he does not make the person of Jesus more significant for faith by demanding in a man of the first century the terminology of the twentieth. Even the most jealous conservatism is now repudiating that conception of the incarnation which would make of Jesus a thesaurus of all wisdom, past, present, and

to come. Dr. Sanday expresses the conviction of many true Christians when he says, "The human thought and tongue of Jesus—and it was only through human thought and speech that even He could communicate with His disciples who were also His brethren—could only express themselves with that relativity which attaches to all that is human. The language of the Apocalypse, in one or another of its forms, was almost the only language available." Thus far has criticism brought us. Jesus expected the more or less immediate and catastrophic consummation of the kingdom, and his own return as the climax of that event. We are willing to acknowledge that, believing as he did in the ultimate realization of the messianic programme, his appropriation of this terminology was not only natural but inevitable. We accept the fact of the increasing realization of the Kingdom and the continued operation of the person of Christ in the sphere of faith as proved, while we recognize in the form of the apocalyptic matter of the gospels "that relativity which attaches to all that is human." And yet for most present-day disciples, when all these concessions have been made, the thirteenth chapter of Mark, the twenty-fourth chapter of Matthew, the seventeenth and twenty-first chapters of Luke, still remain "dead hypotheses." In Coleridge's words they do not "find us." They have no direct contribution to make to our common religious life.

This general indifference and antipathy to the apocalyptic matter in the gospels seems to arise, not from a repudiation of that mental relativity which led to a use of the old imagery of Daniel, but rather from a profound distrust of the catastrophic mood which colors all Jewish eschatology. We can forgive the apocalypticist his symbolism, but we cannot accept as religiously valid for the present day his theory of chaotic and discontinuous progress. The sayings of Jesus about the end of the age are dominated by two ideas, suddenness and unforeseeability. These ideas constitute the continually recurring theme of all Jesus had to say about the future. "As the lightning cometh forth from the east and shineth even unto the west, so shall the coming of the Son of Man be." "Of that day and hour knoweth no one, not even the angels in heaven, neither the Son." "Therefore be ye ready, for in an hour when ye think not." "In a day when

he expecteth not, and in hour when he knoweth not." "Ye know not when the master of the house cometh, at even, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or in the morning, lest coming suddenly he find you sleeping." These words anticipate vague and nameless crises, lying outside the natural sequence of cause and effect, which are to burst upon the believer in the unexpected moment. The scientific and historical imagination find it all but impossible to translate this language about undefined, uncorrelated phenomena into the religious vernacular of the present day.

Over against this characteristic Jewish theory of change must be set the scientific conventionalism of our own day. "Nature," said Lamarck, "is never brusque," and when this dictum is applied to spiritual processes the believer finds that the Synoptic eschatology will not bear the test of such standardization. "The growth of historical study in the nineteenth century," says Professor Bury, "has been determined and characterised by the same general principle which has underlain the simultaneous development of the study of nature, namely the genetic idea. . . . Human history is a causal, genetic process." "The doctrine of the continuity of history," writes Professor Robinson in the same spirit, "is based upon the observed fact that every human institution, every generally accepted idea, every important invention, is but the summation of long lines of progress reaching back as far as we have the patience or means to follow them." Upon this point the difference between the modes of thought of the first and the twentieth centuries is absolute. The Jew knew nothing of a gradual evolution, while the modern believer knows of no progress without such evolution. From this difference the "problem" of the Synoptic eschatology arises.

The scientific presuppositions with which the Biblical critic approaches these apocalyptic utterances prove upon examination to be those of a quarter of a century ago. It is now just over twenty-five years since Henry Drummond wrote his *Natural Law in the Spiritual World*, and, though his contention that the laws governing the two realms are identical has been generally discounted, the presumption that they are analogous still prevails. When Harold Begbie tells us, therefore, that this genera-

tion "does not believe in a sudden heaven or a sudden hell," he merely re-echoes for the generation a conception of spiritual evolution which has very generally dominated religious thought since Drummond's day. A résumé of Drummond's introductory chapter will suggest the difficulties which this now familiar theory of progress places in the path of the apocalyptic programme. For Drummond does not hesitate to affirm at the outset that "catastrophism" has been "dismissed as a final form of science," since the lie of things in the spiritual world, as arranged by a catastrophic theology, is not in harmony with the world around. This proposition leads to an inevitable apotheosis of the "Principle of Continuity,"—the capitals are Drummond's,—which is said to be "growing in splendor with every discovery of science." This law of continuity is the acknowledged *a priori* basis for all the subsequent argument. It is said to be the ultimate ground upon which man as a moral and rational being may hope to stand. It is our final assurance that our intellect shall not be insulted nor our confidence in nature abused. "The Principle of Continuity may be said to be the definite expression in words of our trust that God will not put us to permanent intellectual confusion. . . . To premise a region where the principle of continuity fails would be to overthrow Nature, then science, and last the human mind." Obviously, within such a scheme there is no room for the apocalyptic order with its emphasis upon the sudden and the unforeseen. If this rejection of the catastrophic be the last word of science, then the eschatology of the Synoptic Gospels, not merely in form, but in essence, must be abandoned as archaic and untrue.

But such is the "relativity which attaches to all that is human" that science has faced about upon itself, and the whole theory of change is being carefully re-examined. "No one," writes Professor Bateson, "can survey the work of recent years without perceiving that evolutionary orthodoxy developed too fast, and that a great deal has got to come down." It now seems quite possible, if not probable, that our familiar conceptions of a continuous mechanical evolution must be radically modified, and modified, such is the irony of the situation, in the direction of the catastrophic programme, which the earlier evolutionists

boldly repudiated. When Darwin began to examine the subject of variation, he made a distinction between the slight differences which constitute ordinary variation and the rarer but more marked variations which seemed to arise spontaneously. This distinction has always been preserved and is now familiar to us as "continuous variation" and "discontinuous variation." The old Darwinian doctrine of evolution depends essentially upon the cumulative effect of those minute variations which constitute a continuous series. The examples of discontinuous variation were for the orthodox biologists the exceptional "sports" which proved their rule. Since Darwin's day a partially successful effort has been made to formulate the law of continuous variation, by which the fluctuations of a given individual from the norm may be anticipated. Now, however, that the law has been formulated, it appears to deal with phenomena too minute for natural selection to utilize. On the other hand a faithful empiricism does not hesitate to declare that life is more "brusque" than Darwin admitted. The school of biologists of which Bateson is the zoölogical and DeVries the botanical leader has, therefore, turned its attention to those individuals which illustrate the larger variations—the "mutations" as DeVries calls them—and which presumably constitute a "discontinuous series." Their contention that these considerable mutations make a perceptible difference in the individual's chance of life, and offer firmer holding-ground for natural selection than the insensible differences, is apparently incontrovertible. Whether or not one may be willing to agree with these scientific men that "Every new specific character may be assumed to have arisen by mutation," one must, at least, realize that the burden of proof has been shifted from the new to the old evolutionism, since "an evolution of species proceeding by definite steps is more, rather than less, easy to imagine than an evolution proceeding by the accumulation of indefinite and insensible steps." Of these mutations science can only say that they do not appear in accordance with any discernible law, but "suddenly, abruptly, . . . and unexpectedly, . . . perhaps once or twice in a century, perhaps even only once in a thousand years."

The significance for the question in hand of these changing con-

ceptions of physical evolution would not be so great were they not substantiated by the most significant movements in contemporary philosophy. Professor Höffding tells us that "the greater empirical discontinuity," which recent research has discovered, "has made us all open our eyes for new possibilities to arise through the *prima facie* inexplicable 'spontaneous' variations which are the condition of all evolution. This point is one of peculiar interest. Deeper than speculative philosophy and mechanical science saw in the days of their triumph, we catch sight of new streams, whose sources and laws we have still to discover."

Presumably the ablest and the most suggestive development of this line of thought is to be found in Bergson's *Creative Evolution*. Bergson has cast down the gauntlet before all the mechanical theories of psychical evolution, and is the acknowledged champion of the doctrine of "a new creation." Arguing against the traditional axioms of the past quarter of a century, but from the facts of life, he reiterates the statements of Bateson and DeVries that to foretell the form of a coming individual is beyond our powers, since each new stage of development involves original situations, never before realized. Since these conditions cannot be predicted until they appear, the mechanical theory of evolution has nothing to say of the future. Restating these hypotheses with immediate reference to the realm of personality, Bergson continues: "If our action be one that involves the whole of our person and is truly ours it could not have been foreseen. It is quite certain that if we could view the evolution of life in its entirety, the spontaneity of its movement and the unforeseeability of its procedures would thrust themselves upon our attention."

Bergson is quite conscious of his heresy, but like the true heretic he dare not recant. He reviews the law of continuity with candor, only to abandon it. Like a philosophical Childe Roland, he advances to the Dark Tower of logical infidelity, winds upon his horn and—*pace* Drummond—"overthrows Nature, then science, and last the human mind." "Against this idea of the absolute originality and unforeseeability of forms," he writes, "our whole intellect rises in revolt. The essential function of our intellect, as the evolution of life has fashioned it, is to

be a light for our conduct, to make ready for action on things, to foresee for a given situation, the events favorable or unfavorable, which may follow thereupon. Anything that is irreducible and irreversible in the successive moments of a history eludes science. To get a notion of this irreducibility and irreversibility we must break with scientific habits which are adapted to the fundamental requirements of thought, we must do violence to the mind, and go counter to the natural bent of the intellect."

What the influence of these conclusions may be upon the problem in question we can only vaguely anticipate, but that they will be great we may be certain. Our unutterable confusion regarding Jesus' words about the last things arises from our persistent determination to read them as a scientific description of the realization of the kingdom rather than as a presentation of actual life. Bergson continually reminds us that, as science has only to do with given facts, its eyes are forever turned toward the past. But eschatology is *ipso verbo* a theory of the future, and is not, therefore, a legitimate field for scientific investigation. Consequently, the thirteenth chapter of Mark, with its parallels and Q-supplements, cannot in the very nature of the case furnish any ground for theological speculation. Either they must be read as religious utterances only, or they must be ignored. For to read in retrospect chapters having to do with the religious experience of the future is to become a critical Mr. Facing-both-ways, and a criticism divided against itself cannot stand.

If we are to read these words about the last things in the only way they may be read, we must be willing to "do violence to the mind, and go counter to the natural bent of the intellect." In other words, we must be willing to ignore the conception of continuity which has hitherto seemed a necessity for science, and we must turn to experience itself, as it is given in life. The general recoil of religious thought in this day away from theory toward action should achieve our emancipation from doctrines which have unquestionably blinded us to the actual progress of experience. Whether or not one can see the catastrophic and apocalyptic depends upon one's whole attitude toward life. The theorist still asserts, with Miss Jane Harrison and those who worship the idols of the fathers: "Continuous evolution leaves no gap for revelation

sudden and complete." But the empiricists say with Father Waggett: "There is another view of life, equally valid and practically sometimes more important, which recognises the immediate and lasting effects of crises, difference, and revolution. Our ardor for the demonstration of uniformity of process and of minute continuous change needs to be balanced by a recognition of the catastrophic element in experience."

There is, perhaps, no religious phenomenon in which this contrast between the substance of experience and scientific description is more sharply drawn than in that of sudden conversion. Protestantism is apparently proceeding upon the assumption that Professor James's two classic chapters on Conversion in the *Varieties of Religious Experience* have destroyed that illusion for theology and banished the fact from religion. The experiences of S. H. Hadley and David Brainerd and Henry Alleine and the others of that notable communion to whom a sudden and a revolutionary manifestation of reality was granted, remain for the academic mind interesting psychological illustrations of the encroachment of the subconscious upon the conscious self. But this is the language of the laboratory and not of life. Religion cannot speak in these terms, just because the movements of the subconscious are never given in advance. The discovery of the subliminal self has unquestionably furnished psychologists with a clew to the immediate antecedent causes of sudden conversion, but this discovery has not altered the content of the experience for the convert or diminished its revolutionary values for consciousness.

This is unquestionably the implication of Mr. Begbie's telling "Footnotes" to the *Varieties*. He sees that religion is being taken from the learned, who are crippled by theories, and given to the simple, who accept facts. The facts which he presents lie, it is true, outside the beaten track of ecclesiastical conventions, but they bespeak a profound spiritual reality, which our stereotyped programmes of orderly but uninspired continuity lack. These are confessedly the men and the women whom the state and philanthropy and science had abandoned to the logically suicidal ravages of their own transgressions, but a religion which brought them the sudden and the unforeseen achieved their salvation. There is, to use Carlyle's phrase, "a felt indubitable certainty of Experi-

ence" in these records, which the decent mechanical theology of the times cannot boast.

The problem for the religious man is not whether he will be able to explain experience once it is given, but how he will meet it as it comes. If he worships the Principle of Continuity to the exclusion of all catastrophism, the unforeseen opportunities of the future and its as sudden trials must inevitably find him sleeping. If he insists upon denying the reality of these experiences, his life is by just so much impoverished. The real problem of the gospel eschatology for the present-day Christian is not whether the archaic imagery of the Book of Daniel may be ingeniously dovetailed into contemporary conditions, but whether the continually repeated warning, "Watch, for ye know not," has, in an age which craves the certainties of science, a divine immediacy. The latest utterances of biology and the ablest modern treatise in philosophy are at one with the testimony of profound religious experience in asserting that Jesus' conception of the future, as involving the sudden and the unforeseen, is still as faithful to life as the Sermon on the Mount and the parables of growth, those ancient premonitions of the theory of gradual evolution upon which we have built our modern faith.